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The Machine

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Abstract

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The Machine

by Nancy Hillig

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OFFICE OF
PAPER PREPARATION
A. ADDAMSON
In Charge

Mr. Mohamm opened the door with a pudgy hand and flicked on the cold light. "Here you are, Caines. Your home from 8 to 5." Caines tried to hide his disappointment. The windowless room was quite large but nearly devoid of furniture. One stiff chair was pushed up against the dull wall near the door. The other three pieces consisted of a table, a large wastebasket, and the machine in the opposite corner. Caines moved closer to it. The machine reminded him a little of an upright piano, except in place of a keyboard, there projected a horizontal steel plate that tapered to a razor-sharp edge. Attached to the right side was a swinging arm that carried a similar plate, honed to deadly sharpness. "Mind the blades, son. They would split a hair. Now here's what you do. The boy will bring in a cart with papers like this one." Mr. Mohamm reached for the long, narrow sheet that had been placed on top of the machine. "Fold it over the blade like this and slip the top and bottom edges into the keepers along the grooved lines. Hold it like this, one hand on top and the other underneath. Step to your right, the machine's left, that is, until you're clear. Be sure the paper doesn't slip. It must follow the grooved lines. It's very important to get a perfect cut, you know. And then just press

this pedal." Mr. Mohamm pressed the pedal. Caines watched the machine's arm sweep slowly inward, cut the paper in almost complete silence, then swing steadily back into position. "Place the top half on the table and the bottom half in the old circular file right here." Mr. Mohamm chuckled at his witticism. Caines smiled politely. "Think you can handle the job all right, son?" Caines nodded, moving his fingers over the cold, smooth steel. "Anything you need, just tell the boy when he brings your papers."

As he closed the door behind him, Mr. Mohamm gave Caines an assuring wink. But back at his desk, Mr. Mohamm touched his fingertips together and cast a worried look at his secretary. "Don't know about this youngster. May take him time to work into it. Then again, he may take to it naturally like old Addamson did. Now there was a conscientious fellow. On the job every minute. You could set your watch by him. 7:59 every morning. 5:00 on the dot every night. For twenty-seven years, 7:59 and 5:00. What a man!"

"Yes. And did you notice Addamson's clothes? His shoes were spotless, his suit was never wrinkled. And never once did I ever see a frayed collar or cuff or a missing button."

"Yes. A good man. The cart boys say that he always worked with his suit coat on. Think of that. Standing up all day and wearing a suit coat straight through. What a man!"

"It's a shame he had that accident, isn't it, Mr. Mohamm?"

"Yes. Nasty business it was. Nasty. Guess poor little Joe got the shock of his life when he took in the morning's paper cart. He says he found Addamson's coat on the doorhandle. Says Addamson's shoes were muddy and his shirt coffee-stained. Seems incredible, doesn't it?"

Evelonne licked the envelope she had just addressed. "Do you s'pose Mr. Addamson stepped to the wrong side?"

Mr. Mohamm studied his thumb. "Don't see how he could've done that after so many years. Besides, he couldn't have reached the pedal from there. Must have been a malfunction of the machine. Poor old Addamson. Sliced him right in half, it did. . . . Hope that boy Caines minds the blades. They would split a hair."